

“NO HEALTH WITHOUT MENTAL HEALTH: NO MENTAL HEALTH WITHOUT PHYSICAL ACTIVITY”

Michel Probst, Department of Rehabilitation Sciences, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium
Attilio Carraro, Department of Educational Sciences, University of Padua, Italy

Introduction

Mental health is defined as a condition that permits a state of optimal physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease". It is related to the promotion of well-being, the prevention of mental disorders, and the treatment and rehabilitation of people affected by mental disorders (WHO, 2010). Mental disorders (MD) are common in all regions of the world, affecting every community and age groups. Worldwide epidemiological studies estimated that lifetime prevalence rates of MD in adults are 12.2-48.6%. MD are major contributors to mortality, morbidity and disability (14% of the global burden of disease, measured in DALYs, is attributable to these disorders), cause large economic costs and are often associated with stigma and violations of human rights (WHO, 2008). Moreover, they are frequently co-morbid with many other health conditions (e.g. CVD, cancer, diabetes, HIV, obesity, low-back pain) and injuries. Multidisciplinary approaches and collaboration among professions are essential elements to guide the process of restoration and protection/prevention of MD.

Physical activity and mental health

Scientific evidence highlights that regular participation in physical activity (PA) is associated with improved aspects of mental well-being and reduced symptoms of several mental health disorders (USDHHS, 2008). Both biological (e.g., neurotransmitters, neuromodulators, neuropeptides, neuronal growth factors) and non-biological (e.g., self-esteem, feelings of energy, enjoyment, perceptions of social supports) mechanisms may explain the effect of PA on mental health. Biddle, Fox and Boutcher (2000) summarize five reasons why PA may be an effective mental health promotion strategy: 1) PA is potentially cost-effective; 2) it is associated with minimal adverse side-effects; 3) it can be indefinitely sustained by the individuals; 4) PA may be a cost-effective alternative for those who cannot access therapy or who prefer not to use medication; 5) regardless of whether PA provides psychological benefits, it has clear physical health benefits and should therefore be promoted on this basis.

Physical activity promotion in mental health/psychiatric care centers

Despite these positive indications and the inactive, unhealthy lifestyle of a great part of patients with mental health disorders, the inclusion of PA programmes in psychiatric care settings is not a national standard in the majority of countries, and only a little number of psychiatric institutions adopt strategies to modify PA habits and behaviors of patients.

In the universities centers of Padua and Leuven (Belgium), specific PA programs are included since 30 years in Padua and 50 years in Leuven. The aim is to take care, through a multidisciplinary approach, of different psychiatric pathologies (e.g., depression, psychotic disorders, eating disorders, alcohol and drug abuse). Today there are an increasing evidence-based research in this field.

Conclusion

PA can improve the quality of life of people with mental health problems, representing an added value in the recovery of MD. Changing the lifestyle of psychiatric patients is one of the main goal in the rehabilitation process of MD. Cooperation among PA specialists and other professionals is fundamental to achieve this goal.

Reference

- Biddle S., Fox K., & Boutcher S. (2000). *Physical activity and psychological well-being*. London: Routledge.
- Faulkner G., & Taylor A., (2005). *Exercise and mental health*. London: Routledge.
- Physical Activity Guidelines Advisory Committee. (2008). *Physical Activity Guidelines Advisory Committee Report*. Washington: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Probst M., & Carraro A. (2014). *Physical Activity and Mental Health. A practice-oriented approach*. Milan: Edi-ermes.
- WHO (2008). *mhGAP: Mental Health Gap action Programme*. Geneva: WHO Press.